





# Consumer Reports®



JANUARY 2007

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- **TOP PICKS** among 44 new phones tested
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PHONES**

## Computers

### Waiting for Vista, the OS that may steal Christmas

**D**on't expect to find a computer loaded with Vista, Microsoft's first major new Windows version in five years, in your pile of holiday gifts this year. Thanks to Microsoft's post-New Year's release date, holiday shoppers looking for a Windows PC face a dilemma. If you buy now but want Vista, you must upgrade later, possibly at extra cost. To get a PC with Vista installed, you must wait until early 2007.

If you must buy now, such as for a gift or tax write-off, here are ways to reduce the costs and hassles of upgrading later:

**Look for a deal.** As the year ends, prices on non-Vista PCs are falling, as retailers try to drive holiday sales.

**Check the specs.** Choose a configuration based on the Vista version you'll want to run. Look for either a Windows Vista Capable or Premium Ready logo. The former provides enough power to run the Basic version of Vista, while the latter lets you effectively run higher-end Vista versions—Home Premium and Ultimate. Although Microsoft recommends just 512MB of RAM for Vista Capable systems, we suggest you buy at least 1GB.

**Follow the right upgrade path.** If you must buy before 2007, and want to upgrade to Vista later, buy a system running Windows Media Center Edition as the operating system. This version of Windows XP provides the easiest upgrade path to Vista Home Premium, the

sweet spot among the three Vista editions for home users. Vista Basic leaves out many of the operating system's best features. Ultimate is costlier, with more features than most home users need.

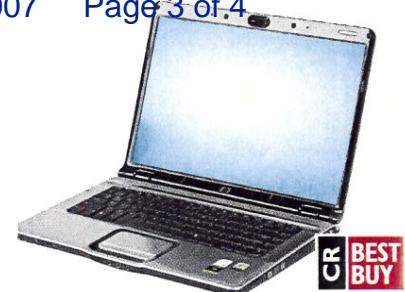
**Participate in the coupon program.** Manufacturers and dealers are offering coupons for Vista upgrades to those who buy computers from now to mid-March. The deal you get will depend on the system you buy. Some manufacturers are offering a free upgrade, while others charge an upgrade fee of \$49 to \$79.

If you can postpone buying, or are unsure about Vista, consider these points:

**Look before you leap to an upgrade.** It's not always easy to upgrade to a new operating system. You may need to resolve software incompatibilities, upgrade security software, or install drivers. Those may be reason enough to stick with XP.

**Vista offers a lot.** Based on our early looks at prerelease versions, Vista provides better photo editing and organizing capabilities than XP, parental controls, and an updated user interface. Microsoft is also touting Vista's improved security, though we haven't tested that yet.

**Consider a Mac.** Buying a Macintosh will get you a brand that excels in both technical support and reliability. But it won't sidestep the operating system dilemma entirely, because Apple plans an upgrade to its operating system, OS X, in spring 2007, which will most likely require an upgrade cost of \$100 to \$200.



1 HP \$645



2 Dell \$900

#### LAPTOP COMPUTERS

The HP includes 512MB of RAM; the others have 1GB of RAM. The HP and Dell E1505 have 15-inch screens; the E1705 has a 17-inch display.

##### Best 15.4-inch budget model:

**1 HP Pavilion dv6000z \$645, CR Best Buy**  
Good performance across the board. Weighs 6.1 pounds. Battery life: 2 hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

##### For more features and performance:

**2 Dell Inspiron E1505 \$900, CR Best Buy**  
Excellent speed, very good multimedia features, and good ergonomics and display. Weighs 6.6 pounds. Battery life: 3/4 hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

##### Best desktop replacement:

**3 Dell Inspiron E1705 \$1,240**  
Excellent speed, very good multimedia features, and very good ergonomics. Weighs 7.7 pounds. Battery life: 3/4 hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

## iPod boom boxes

We tested six powered speaker systems with docks that accommodate all iPod models. These three reproduced sound most accurately. The JBL had the most features, including a USB port and a video output. The Klipsch's dock supports any size iPod without adapters. The Bose was the single most accurate model but lacks a line input.



JBL Radial, \$300; Klipsch iGroove, \$250; Bose SoundDock (not shown), \$300.

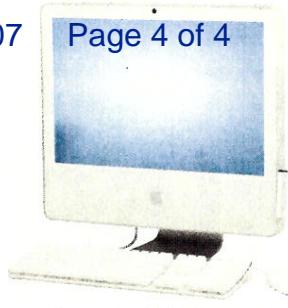




3 Dell \$1,240



6 Gateway \$1,080



8 Apple \$1,500



4 HP \$605



7 Dell \$870



10 Gateway \$2,035

## DESKTOP COMPUTERS

Budget models include 512MB of RAM; others have 1GB. Except for the Apple, prices do not include monitors.

### Budget models:

#### 4 HP Pavilion s7600e \$605

Slim case; very good speed and ergonomics; not upgradeable. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

#### 5 Dell Dimension E521 \$450

Great price; very good speed, ergonomics, expandability. Fair 3D gaming, speakers. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

### Best overall performer:

#### 6 Gateway DX420S \$1,080

Top performer among all desktops; excellent speed, 3D gaming. Tech support and reliability are undistinguished.

### For more features and performance:

#### 7 Dell Dimension E520 \$870 CR Best Buy

Lowest-priced workhorse. Excellent speed; very good features and ergonomics. Tech support and reliability are undistinguished.

#### 8 Apple iMac 20-inch \$1,500

Sharp, 20-inch screen. Excellent speed; very good features, ergonomics. Apple's desktops have proven very reliable, and its tech support superior.

## GAMING COMPUTERS

Dell, Gateway, and HP are offering souped-up systems for gamers. Specialty brands like Alienware and Velocity Micro cater to gamers, with options such as liquid cooling and a wider selection of components. These systems are costlier than Dell and Gateway computers, even for similarly configured models. For the extra money, what you're getting is mainly style. A new graphics standard, due with Windows Vista, will render obsolete the video cards currently in these systems. If you must buy one now to upgrade later, prepare to spend \$300 for a new card.

### Best models from traditional manufacturers:

#### 9 Dell XPS 410 \$2,215

Top performer; most robust features; plenty of room to customize. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

#### 10 Gateway FX510XG \$2,035 CR Best Buy

More traditionally styled; very good to excellent performer. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

### Best specialty model:

#### 11 Velocity Micro Gamers Edge PCX \$2,730

Colorful case has blinking LEDs and transparent side. Noisy. Sparse documentation. Very good to excellent performer. Tech support and reliability are unknown for this brand.

## Headphones

We tested over-the-ear headphones, which generally offer better sound quality for serious listening. The Grado headphones are comfortable and lightweight, with excellent sound quality and soft ear pads. The Sennheisers use active noise-cancellation technologies to reduce ambient noise—an increasingly popular feature.



Grado SR-60, \$70, CR Best Buy (left), and Sennheiser PXC 250, \$150.

## For more information

**Free: More last-minute gifts.** Reviews of the iPod Shuffle, Microsoft Zune, more digital cameras, and other hot gifts at [ConsumerReports.org/HolidayGuide](http://ConsumerReports.org/HolidayGuide).

**Free: TV Quick Picks.** Our holiday gift guide identifies fine choices in plasmas, LCDs, and more. And our TV Decision Guide walks you through the key considerations when buying a new set.